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Digging Deeper as an Elementary Art Educator

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Arts Administration, Education and Policy

Ohio State University – Mostly Online Master's Program

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Introduction

I came to the Ohio State University's "Mostly-Online Master's" program in the summer of 2011 through accident, familiarity, necessity, and much contemplation. A proud graduate of the Ohio State University's Art Education Department in 2006, I found myself ambitious and well-prepared for the world of teaching. After a short period as a substitute teacher, I was fortunate to receive an offer to teach within the Benjamin Logan Local School District in January of 2007, and my career as an art teacher was officially underway. Five years passed like a blur of excitement and 'trial-by-fire' exploration, and I soon found the requirement of a Master's degree placed onto my already-full educator's plate. No option seemed quite right until a former graduate student pointed me back towards Ohio State – the obvious choice hidden right beneath my nose! From a pleasant conversation with Dr. Karen Hutzler to a few preliminary letters and emails, I was once again officially a "Buckeye"!!

Coming back to Ohio State's Art Ed. program was as comforting as it was disquieting. Familiarity with people and surroundings can help alleviate many additional stresses when undertaking something new, and I was thankful for that small sense of security. At the same time, I came into the Master's program feeling that my undergraduate preparation and my current teaching practice had somehow "missed the mark". I had all of the foundations, and knew current practices and trends, but as an art teacher – with an almost infinite number of possibilities towards curriculum design and implementation – I simply felt that my Elementary program was not as engaging and revolutionary as it should be. My hesitation with enrolling in

the Mostly-Online program was that, in doing so, I was setting myself up for a potential repeat performance of my undergraduate studies instead of trying something 'extraordinary'.

The first few days of the summer introductory course were painfully repetitive for me, but my desire to fully invest myself in the Master's process pushed me as always to seek the positives within any experience. That open-mindedness set the stage for seeing the Big Ideas approach to teaching and artmaking in a new light. What started as a unique personal challenge – to not only make the Master's program relevant to my teaching, but to engage the Big Ideas approach with an open-minded perspective – would eventually become my own personal mantra of sorts. That simple mindset of 'digging just a little deeper' to find my own personal relevance would lead to some of the most rewarding aspects within my sequence of post-graduate courses, and that holistic experience will certainly not be lost on me for many years to come.

Within this writing I have chosen to focus on two particular courses within my Master's program. The first essay, *Moving Back To Big Ideas: Artmaking in the Elementary Classroom*, gives voice to my initial hesitation with coming back to Ohio State, and illustrates the complex and richly rewarding path of growth and artistic fulfillment that eventually would evolve with patience and persistence over time. The second essay, *Digital Stories: Experimental Narratives In A Curricular Context*, continues the narrative of discovery encountered during my first year and on into my second year within the Master's program, and brings the reader into my current thoughts, practice and intimations of what my future as an Art educator might hold.

Moving Back To Big Ideas: Artmaking in the Elementary Classroom

Introduction

Dr. Walker's Art Ed. 604D, *The Artmaking Process*, was the second foundational course taken during the first year of my Ohio State University's mostly-online Art Education Master's program. In conjunction with a short, weeklong introductory class in the summer of 2011, I found myself once again returning to the vaguely familiar realm of my pre-teaching/undergraduate Art Education experiences. The settings had changed since my last time on campus in 2006 – the former Hopkins Hall location having been replaced with the venerated Buckeye stadium and the 'classrooms' within – but there was still a comfortable familiarity with the staff and program itself, and that somehow felt like a much-anticipated return to my alma mater. Art Ed. 604 therefore provided an exciting "springboard" back into the familiar world of post-secondary investigation - one that I had comfortably laid aside during my five years actively teaching Visual Art in the Benjamin Logan Elementary classroom in rural Bellefontaine, Ohio.

It's of relative importance to share a bit of the decision-making process that eventually led me back to the Ohio State University's Art Education program. My experience as an undergraduate was immensely challenging and rewarding. I had returned to Ohio State in 2002 to finish my Bachelor's degree after a decade far away from any collegial setting. The various life experiences within that time away truly shaped my desires to not only attain a college degree, but to also follow the somewhat elusive aspiration of eventually becoming an art

teacher. During my time back on campus I quickly realized that the path of being a “non-traditional” student was not to be an easy one, but at the end of the road – with teaching degree and Elementary art career firmly in hand – I could finally admit that the rewards were absolutely worth the efforts. Five years into my current profession I had come to yet another crossroads in my educational career. An integral piece within my school district’s teacher licensure process dictated that we as educators must begin a Master’s degree program within the first five years of employment. I had looked into several different options before finally deciding on Ohio State’s “mostly-online” Master’s in Art Education program, but no other avenue seemed to “fit” quite like OSU. Therefore, I have chosen to reflect upon the experiences during my return to college in the fall of 2011 as the ones that seem to most closely align with my philosophical vision as both an artist and an educator.

The Inspiration

Returning to the scholarly realm of Ohio State’s Art Education Department was both familiar and refreshing. As an undergrad I had been disciplined in Dr. Walker’s theories regarding “Big Ideas”, and in one way, shape or form had incorporated them into my Elementary art curriculum. As a reflective practitioner, I knew coming into the Master’s program that my implementation of Big Ideas and the accompanying theories had been moderately successful, at best, at the K-4 level. Part of my decision to return to Ohio State was to continue my investigations into the Big Ideas thematic approach to instruction, and to seek to resolve what I would best term as my “personal ineffectiveness” with incorporating those theories successfully in a classroom setting. Art Education 604 with Dr. Walker proved to be an extremely useful ‘first step’ in the collegial aspect of my professional practice.

From the beginning, my experience with a course that essentially reviewed Big Ideas was certainly not the revolutionary adventure shared by my classmates (none of them OSU - Art Ed. Alumni) during our first summer together, and I understood that such inevitable review and repetition was to be a personal challenge from the very beginning of my Master's program. What I hoped to gain from embarking on that rather repetitive journey was two-fold; to reevaluate my current teaching methodology in relation to a more comprehensive integration of the Big Ideas approach, and to somehow fill an inexplicable feeling that "something was missing" within the ways that I had been teaching Visual Art. After our summer discussions and explorations into Big Idea methodologies, the first tenant seemed easily attainable – simply incorporate that thematic approach to artmaking with more persistence and fidelity. The second set of elusive thoughts deserved much deeper consideration, and perhaps begins to resolve itself by the end of this essay.

Back Into "Big Ideas"

The repetition of information during the summer of 2011 left me with the deep-seated, uneasy feeling that perhaps I had made the wrong choice by reenrolling in Ohio State's Master's program. My familiarity with the conceptual framework behind the Big Ideas approach to teaching art led to some rather tedious readings and conversations from the very beginning – that selfish feeling of "been there, done that", which I quickly recognized as the opposite direction I wished my teaching career to follow. With so much time and financial investment already given to my educational endeavors, it didn't take much consideration to realize that this was one of life's moments where my internal motivation would have to be to

try and make the most from an uncertain situation. That positive perspective was the mindset I brought to Dr. Walker's 604 class in the autumn of 2011, or at least that was my well-placed intention as the quarter began.

The course description for *AE 604: The Artmaking Process* begins as follows: "The primary goal of this course is to present artmaking as an engagement with ideas. In the course, we will develop understandings of artmaking practices through reflection on your own artmaking process as you develop a series of artworks to investigate a significant idea and topic." (Walker, 2011) A student can never receive the full impact of a course through a brief, written description, and so I initially read those words with 'a grain of salt', knowing that the end result might indeed feel quite different. In retrospect I'm quite amazed at how closely we adhered to the objectives of the course. In fact, reexperiencing Big Ideas with an open-minded perspective, accompanied by an intense focus on personal practices, took me from that initial place of quiet hesitation to what I would consider to be no less than a reawakening of my artistic spirit.

The first assignment truly set the stage for the remainder of the course. We began by reading Chapter 7 from Dr. Walker's *Teaching Meaning in Artmaking*. Choosing this chapter, which investigates the artistic processes of Sandy Skoglund, Claes Oldenburg, and Keith Haring in relation to an idea-based approach, as the stepping-off point of our own investigations was an extremely thoughtful decision. My personal mindset going into this program was that we as art educators approach our discipline with the general hierarchy of "art teacher" first, "artist" second (if we even truly consider ourselves "real artists" at all!). An important thought from

that chapter which reaffirms this thought was, “An instructor’s attitude toward artmaking is crucial to how his or her students learn to understand the artmaking process.” (Walker, 2001) I wholeheartedly believe that we as art teachers are at our best when we are confident in our teaching methodologies AND our artistic self-assuredness, which taken in combination leads to an internal satisfaction and an otherwise contagious passion for what we are trying to accomplish educationally.

Looking back through the various course assignments that followed, I am deeply impressed with the amount of artistic exploration and growth evidenced over an eleven-week period. I typically find that it’s easier to be amazed when looking closely at an artwork or series of works created over an extended period of time than with something more abstract and analytical such as “process” or “decision-making”. I mention these thoughts at this point to illustrate my skeptical/ educational perspective and I suppose, my self-indulgent, creative point of view. To illustrate this point, our second assignment asked that we begin the process of selecting a “Big Idea” to focus on throughout the remainder of the course. I chose “Environment” for my topic as it related at that time to my disconnection with the outdoors, autumn as my favorite season, and the literary works I had been reading for pleasure (Jack London, Edward Abbey, and other personal favorites) (1). By the end of the second and third assignments – a series of creative exercises aimed at building an artistic knowledge base – I was quite convinced that creatively, I was either going NOWHERE or was dangerously heading in the wrong direction. Working through a Big Ideas approach had never been my conscious, chosen approach to artmaking, and it follows that inevitably I’ve hesitated at incorporating it with full integrity into the Elementary art room. In all frankness I wasn’t entirely confident that utilizing

these exploratory methods would yield results beyond what I already envisioned in relation to some unknown, final product relating to the “natural environment” and an obvious relation to myself. Therefore, I certainly wasn’t expecting the amount of creative and intellectual growth yet to come.

By the time Assignments Four and Five rolled around it was mid-October, the school year well underway, and the balancing act of being a teacher AND student at the same time fast becoming a stressful realization. I was still quite focused on the “natural environment” as my creative pathway, and quite honestly was simply going through the paces to complete the assignments. In fact, I had just received feedback from Week Three’s creative endeavor, which stated that I had not followed the parameters of the assignment and therefore should redo it for the sake of “how it might develop my thinking.”(2). I grudgingly redid the assignment (with less creative success than the first attempt, or so I thought) and immediately began to sludge my way through Assignment Four. At that point the exercises were beginning to alter my focus, but at the time I was still tenuously clinging to the idea that my artwork would be environmentally conscious, in the naturalistic sense. In the fifth week we were to choose two contemporary artists to further our thinking (I chose environmental artist Jacque Fresco and animator Walt Disney), and in retrospect I can see that I was desperately beginning to force my ‘environmental agendas’. Dr. Walker’s feedback left me scratching my head and wondering why things were feeling so “wrong” . . . for Week Five’s assignment I could muster no better grade than a B!?! My confidence in the Big Ideas approach was rapidly diminishing, and it had not been that high to begin with.

The Darkness and the Storm

As the end of October drew nearer and both teaching and personal priorities became paramount, we continued ever-onward with our Big Ideas. For Week Six we were assigned an excerpt from *Processing Process: The Event of Artmaking* by Richardson and Walker. Perhaps it was the timing of it all, my increasing resistance to the prescribed processes, or simply the overwhelming stresses of it all, but I really began to feel myself unraveling at that point in the course. Deleuzian thoughts were completely lost on me. “Artmaking, as a material practice, can allow for contact with the virtualities of becoming if representation is not permitted to thwart and derail difference as it animates becoming.” (Richardson/Walker, 2011) and others of that philosophical nature only seemed to muddle my already troubled thoughts. Peter Elbow’s dichotomous thinking in Week Seven was the straw that broke my intellectual back! My written reflections to Elbow’s *Uses of Binary Thinking* at that point mirrored my growing frustrations: “After reading through Elbow’s excerpt I was left scratching my head . . . and thinking. My first thought was, “*Man, I must have had a LONG day! That stuff just went right over my head!!*” I sat down and read it again . . much more *slowly* this time! I then thought, “*What kind of last name is Elbow? . . .*” (Reese, 2011) On the outside I was making light of what I couldn’t clearly understand, and on the inside I was growing more and more dejected.

At this time I clearly remember my inner struggles with completing Week Six’s creative assignment (3). My time was limited; I felt that I had completely derailed from any sort of environmental thinking and my desire to continue “playing” with Big Ideas was at an all time low. It was at that point in the quarter that we began to “disrupt the knowledge base”, and

Jasper Johns' nonsense drawing commands, as well as Richard Serra's action verbs came into play once more. We had briefly discussed them during the summer course, and I remembered both artists quite fondly from my OSU undergraduate classes. Nonsense, indeed! I was particularly rushed that weekend, and remember not putting much thought into the process. I simply "randomized" my artistic actions (a la Johns and Serra), let go of controlling the artmaking process, and the work evolved in a fashion entirely of its own. I drew, cut, "zoomed" and multiplied, "fired" and "discarded" ideas until they became interestingly playful projects that stood by themselves as thoughtful combinations of art and intellectual exploration. The day was cold and grey, and my mood quite the same. As I sat down to reflect on the completed tasks, I believe something at that time was beginning to 'shift' in my creative approach: "For my big idea of environment I would say it pushes me towards more creative ways to look at and express my feelings towards objects I already have familiarity with – especially in the creative, lighthearted sense the pictures (...) seem to be made in." (Reese, 2011) As stressful as it was I actually enjoyed that assignment. I didn't know it then, but my intellectual clouds were beginning to brighten a bit.

Creative Revelations

By Week Eight I was projecting my frustrations quite readily onto the discussion boards "Throughout the article I found myself 'stuck' with wording. It was a long read, complicated grammatically by "draft-quality" issues. Aside from that, however, my thinking became muddled with my sense of the word "nonsense", and what the author was working towards." (Reese, 2011) At that point, however, the assigned readings were nearly at an end, and the

studio portions of the course set to take off in monumental directions. My creative assignments were beginning to take on a life of their own, and much of that impetus stemmed from the “disruptions” in Weeks Six and Seven (4). While my ideas still revolved around “environment”, they did so rather loosely and playfully, and as a result of the rather silly adventures explored in Week Eight I was starting to once again find a bit of momentum and take a positive turn towards the final few weeks of class (5).

While Dr. Walker advised early on that our project was to be viewed as something that was continually evolving and that there wasn’t necessarily an “end”, I would consider the final three weeks and the projects within Assignment 9 to be the Grande finale, or culmination of so much time, thought, and creative effort. The series of artworks that I created at the end of Art Ed. 604 were as far away from my original “environmental” intentions as I could have possibly dreamed. Instead of creating artworks about ecological concerns with environmental materials, my projects ended up addressing more fictitious environments, and unwittingly applied themselves directly to my Elementary classroom. As an initial brainstorming project I started a “creative journal”, focusing on altering the classroom environment in imaginative ways, and out of that journal came the accompanying projects: using music and sounds to create an alternative, peaceful environment, and adding sculptural and graphic artworks to enhance the overall appeal of our art room (6). All of the works were incorporated into my art room at the end of this course (during Christmas holiday break) and continue to be creative focal points to this very day – Elementary students are very in tune to the nuances of their surroundings. In that regard alone the creative process mapped out through this course,

utilizing the Big Ideas approach as a way of approaching artmaking, was immensely successful .
. and this conclusion stems from my persistently skeptical point of view.

At the end of it all, as I now draw closer to the end of this Master's program, I am now able to reflect more profoundly on the impact Dr. Walker's 604 course had on my personal approach to art making. Looking backwards to the methods taken during the course I can now more clearly see the logical progression from initial idea to final synthesis. In the midst of it all came the chaos – that dichotomous way of thinking about and making art – that at the time felt so frustrating and disconnected. Dr. Walker best summed up those thoughts in her final feedback response to me: "It is giving them strategies as tools that enable them to think beyond the obvious. It is teaching students that ideas can emerge during artmaking rather than having to have all the ideas beforehand. It is teaching students that often meaning happens after the artwork is made and we reflect on the results." (Walker, 2011) That process of "letting go" was something that finally came to me at the end of the course, and was something that I would carry with me into my own classroom as an artist and teacher during the remainder of that scholastic year.

Into Practice

From the tumultuous experiences of AE 604 came a newfound determination to integrate the Big Ideas approach, once and for all, into my Elementary art curriculum. I began over the summer of 2011 to map out the thematic approach that we would take for the upcoming school year. Revolving around the ambiguous question "*What's the BIG IDEA?*" I structured the year's curriculum around three separate themes: "Identity", "Place", and

“Imagination” (7). From each of those Big Ideas we followed the basic tenants of spontaneity, selection, disruption, and of course the ‘art-making’ process (complete with reflection) . . . at an Elementary level, of course! First through fourth-grade students started “process portfolios” at the beginning of the year, documented their thoughts, “key concepts” and artistic explorations throughout, and ended with a thoughtful record of their creative journeys. As stated above, sound became a normal addition to our classroom environment, with several projects focused on that sub-theme (Wassily Kandinsky paintings, ceramic wind-chime sculptures) (8). The addition of a life-sized Mr. Reese cut-out (emphasizing creative thinking) and the “Art Room Monkey” sculpture (our new inspirational, if not mildly-creepy classroom pet) altered the art room in positive ways that had not been considered since my initial years as an Elementary Art teacher.

Altering the curriculum was not a new change for me, as I continually seek out new (and better?) approaches towards teaching Visual Art. Fully utilizing the thematic, Big Ideas approach, however, was a paradigmatic shift in my methodology. During the 2011-2012 school year students journaled, ‘brainstormed’, and reflected on their artmaking moreso than ever before owing to the Process Portfolio documentation of their work. Analyzing the students’ thought processes and writings from that year, without any previous data or reference points, left me wondering if perhaps I had not overestimated the capabilities of my Elementary students. A small handful of the 500, 1st – 4th grade students served by this approach seemed quite adept at the thoughtful, journalistic style we had adopted. The vast majority, however, wrote prescriptively (based either upon my examples or those of their classmates), tersely, and with less engagement than I had hoped for. The remaining few students comprising the lower

end of the spectrum had little success with the written journal, and as a simple numbers game (teacher/student ratios of 24/1) they unfortunately did not receive the time, attention and resources needed to create a successful record of their thinking and artistic processes.

If I question the Big Ideas implementation in terms of successes and failures I would answer with an air of optimistic uncertainty. Students were positively engaged in all of the thematic projects throughout the year, and seemed to take great pride in their journals throughout the process. At the same time, it was difficult to ascertain the differences in their responses to the Big Ideas approach vs. any previous year's experience as I had always incorporated a very similar, albeit 'stripped-down' thematic approach since my initial years of OSU-trained instruction. There were also times that the student portfolios appeared to be drudgery or "busy-work". Through observations, general remarks, and final yearly reflections it felt as if the shared consensus was "Less writing – More Art!" (Sailor LeVan, 4th grade) and that the students were having a difficult time following the written thought processes laid out by their well-intentioned art teacher. Journaling as a creative thinker was indeed planned as a natural complement to their daily classroom routines, but with such mixed results and reactions the question then becomes one of allocating instructional time to that which is most relevant, appealing, and beneficial for the overall creative growth of students. And that, among many other questions, is one that I do not currently have an answer to.

Reflecting – and Into the Future

From a personally creative and intellectual standpoint, Art Ed. 604 was one of my most rewarding classes taken at Ohio State. Through Dr. Walker's thoughtful instruction I once again

found the creative side of myself that I so often seem to lose touch of while teaching, parenting, and living a “normal” everyday life. Finding that creative spark truly affected all aspects of my life at that time, and I not only approached common tasks with more playfulness and creativity, but also found that I was teaching with a renewed sense of efficacy and artistic self-awareness. To be an art teacher is to be an artist at heart, and if for no other reason it was worth the experiences of AE 604 to be able to once again renew my artistic self-confidence.

Judging the 2011-12 school year as an overall positive experience, it would follow that I would have continued a similar approach within the current year’s art curriculum. Between AE 604 and the current year, however, many thoughts, influences and ideas have altered my educational perspective. Additional Master’s courses such as Dr. Eisenhower’s *Digital Texts* class and Dr. Hutzel’s *Multicultural/Service-Learning* course had profoundly altered my conceptual focus. At the same time, the Ohio Department of Education (under directives from Federal Race To the Top legislation) initiated an intensely exhaustive series of mandates prior to the summer of 2012, focused on bolstering student achievement through a new, complexly detailed teacher evaluation system. To comply with these ambiguous initiatives I took what I would consider a ‘step backwards’ this year by designing my curriculum around an approach that favors “measuring student growth targets” in lieu of continuing to foster a Big Ideas, thematic approach.

In conclusion, how does such a progressive/regressive approach ultimately affect not only my personal teaching perspective, but more importantly the hundreds of students under my tutelage (and thousands upon thousands more elsewhere in the public school system) as

well as the Art Education field as a whole? There are so many issues within the current, ever-changing landscape of public education that it is not difficult to lose focus, and perhaps even lose heart. Much of this current year has been a struggle for me in one form or another, and very few of those struggles seem to relate directly to the ideals of the educational advancement of students set forth during my autumn semester Art Education 604 course. In fact, I had nearly lost touch with the positives and successes of that place and time until I once again returned to them through the writing of this paper. I believe that the future of this field, and my own place within it, rests firmly on continuing to remain creative and progressive in relation to the theories of sound Visual Arts education. Moreover, Eldon Katter in the current issue of SchoolArts magazine offers this piece of thoughtful advice: "As our nation struggles with an unsettling economy, we, as art teachers, need to put our best foot forward and promote what we know to be true: The success of our nation is dependent on all children having a comprehensive education." (Katter, 2013) By "comprehensive" I can only imagine that Katter understands the unique perspective the arts offers to the educational field as a whole. I was a living, breathing example of successful Art Education merely a year ago, and have sadly lost sight of those ideals beneath a series of mandates that seek to systematize my methods and restrict my full creative potential as an educator. My goal is to continue putting my "best foot forward", and to remember the successful steps, such as my time spent in Art Ed. 604, that have gotten me this far.

References

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Picture Notations

(1) Assignment #2 – Slide from a PowerPoint presentation focusing on my Big Idea of “Environment”.



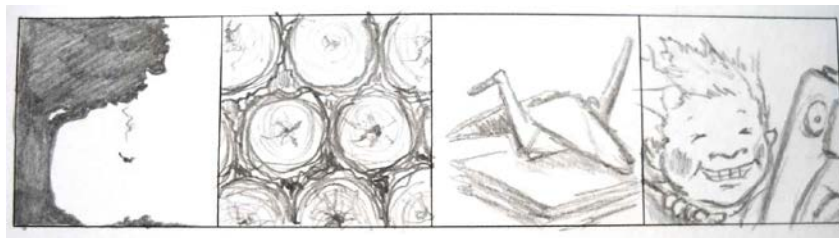
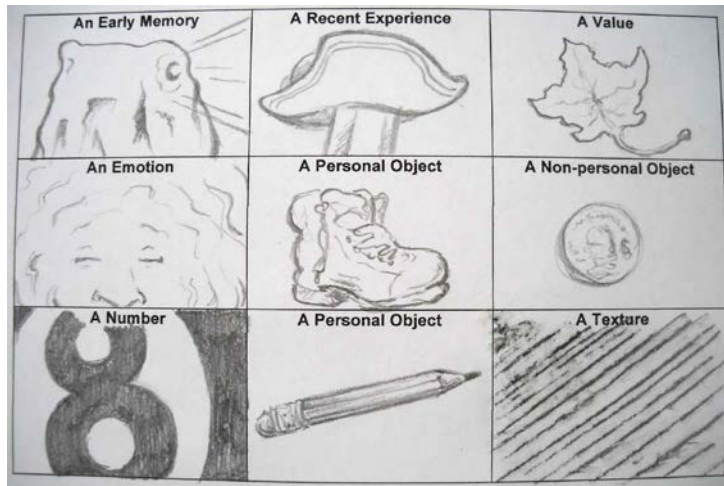
ENVIRONMENT

For this quarter's Graduate student artmaking, I will be focusing on "Environment" as my 'I'.

Environment is a very important piece of who I am as a person and as an artist. Having grown up in a rural environment, for the majority of my life, I have a strong connection with the rural environments that I grew up in. On my latest bicycle ride through the country, I decided to visually document some of the most significant places that are my personal corner of the world.

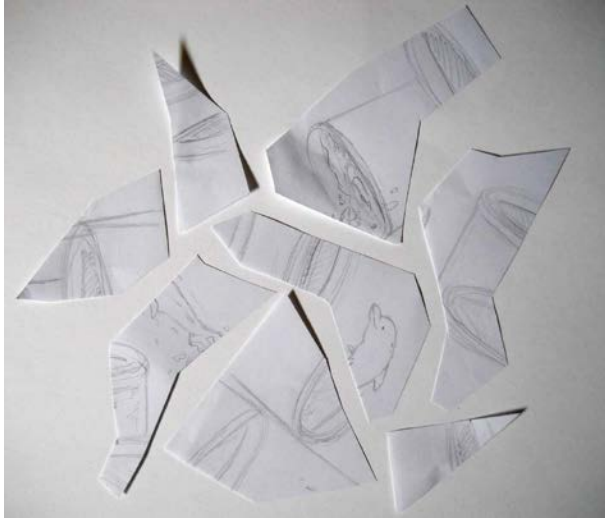
With family roots set deeply within Hardin County's countryside, I grew up spending a lot of time within close proximity of our local Amish community. Their traditional ways of coexisting with the land has always had relevance with how I try to live - peacefully within my own environment. One of the things I remember from the farm above as a child after the Amish had handcrafted a dresser and desk for my son Graham now uses both desk and dresser in our current house. Connections such as these give me a sense of remaining in touch with the environments of my past.

(2) Samples from creative Assignment #3.



(3) Creative assignments – Week #6 . . Jasper Johns’ “Environmental Grid” drawing and deconstructed pencil drawing. Serra’s “fired” cardboard cabin and “discarded” paper reclamation project (recycling trash!).



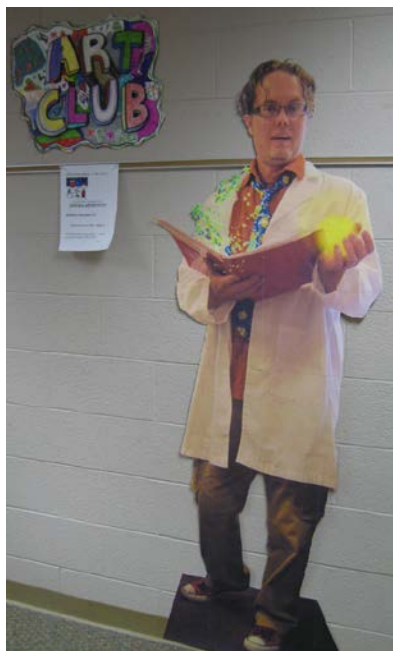


(4) Scene from Assignment #7 – “Oppositions” PowerPoint . . “Accepting/Rejecting”



(6) Assignment #9 – Final project, altering the classroom environment . . “monkey” and “Mr. Reese 2-D cutout”





(7) Incorporating “Big Ideas” . . Ben Logan Elementary classroom board display.



(8) Student work – Kandinsky's "Musical Art" combining sound and artmaking.



Digital Stories: Experimental Narratives In A Curricular Context

Introduction

Art Education 7606, *Digital Texts*, was the second summer's weeklong campus course during my Ohio State University's mostly-online Art Education Master's program. Taught by Dr. Jennifer Eisenhauer, a professor I had become acquainted with during both my undergraduate studies in the early 2000s and once again during winter quarter 2011 (AE 795, *Critical Dialogue About Art and Aesthetics*) I began this course with a comfortable sense of familiarity and assuredness. Dr. Eisenhauer had made it a point to stop by our summer 2011 on-campus session for introductions and a brief overview of things yet to come, and that simple, thoughtful act reminded me of the professionalism and student-centeredness that I had remembered from her in the past. If there was any sense of hesitancy prior to beginning AE 7606 it lay somewhere within the unknown "digital" content yet to be experienced.

When previewing the syllabus prior to the start of the quarter, I first read the Course Description, which read as follows:

This course explores digital storytelling, in its many forms, as a location of social, cultural, personal, and artistic intervention. The pedagogical and curricular roles of digital storytelling are also investigated. Through readings, writing, presentation, and creative- technology mediated work, this course is designed to aid teachers in envisioning the role of technology in art classrooms guided by conceptual approaches. (Eisenhauer, 2011)

There is an underlying ambiguity within any brief, written description that allows a sense of hesitant curiosity to manifest itself, and reading the description initiated those seemingly insignificant reservations I held somewhere in the back of my mind prior to starting the course.

Stories have always held an esteemed place within my Elementary Visual Arts curriculum, but as a self-proclaimed nostalgist (and a bit of a technological skeptic) I began the second summer with the faintest of notions that the application of “digital texts” into the Elementary Art classroom might be an uneasy fit. At the same time, I was eager to dive in and give it a fair chance.

Reminiscing About Life’s Narrative

I have always been an avid fan of written texts, and within that statement can be found my sense of introspective curiosity with trying to better understand where such a fondness originated. When I was very young I can remember sitting and looking at books, long before I was able to read them. The colorful pictures within the children’s books of my youth kept my attention for hours on end, and helped with “filling the well” of creativity within my highly imaginative mind (Cameron, 1992). I don’t particularly remember my parents sitting and reading to my brother, my sister, or me on a regular basis when we were young – obviously at some point, the rare and treasured times that they did so must have sparked something magical deep inside my mind . . . something that lead to an everlasting love of written and visual texts. I do know that an affinity for reading was something that my wife and I sought to instill within our own two boys before they were able to read on their own.

From my earliest days I have been enamored with the art of storytelling. I find that love affair easiest to explain from the perspective of my introverted personality – that place where I am more comfortable listening rather than speaking, with internalizing others’ stories, and subsequently integrating those narratives into my own personal subconscious. An

entertaining, finely crafted story intrigues me beyond measure, and I fondly remember childhood days spent with my grandparents, listening to the ‘old folks spinning their yarns’. Pictures have likewise evoked an imaginative and profoundly emotional response deep within me. They somehow remain painted in my mind, each one eliciting more than their ‘thousand words’. I vividly recall the picture books of my childhood, the photographs from our family albums, and the countless images viewed through my artist’s perspective. A “good book” - one that I find myself returning to time and again – is one that takes root somewhere deep within my soul and somehow affects my worldly perspective more than written words can explain. Milne, Schultz, Watterson, Barrie, Twain, Tolkien, Thoreau, Abbey, etc. . . each author reflecting not only their own unique (and oftentimes humorous) perspective regarding the world but also mirroring my personal sense of understanding and belonging. I do not know that these sentiments carry the same resonance for all people – I imagine on some incomprehensible level they must – but reflecting on these experiences within this writing is my way of illustrating the personal significance and deep-seeded importance of verbal, written, and pictorial texts to a creative-minded person.

One overriding aspect of storytelling that continues to fascinate me is the “human” aspect. As a species we are unique in many ways, but the social aspect of being human – needing to relate to others, wanting to hear and be heard – is one of the most intriguing and perplexing traits I know. “Everyone has many stories to tell. The ritual of sharing insights about life can be immensely valuable both to those who speak and those who bear witness. People who believe they are mundane, uninteresting, or unmemorable possess beneath this mask a vivid, complex, and rich body of stories just waiting to be told.” (Lambert, 1994). With all

candidness it is difficult for me to pinpoint exactly where I fall within that quote. As a creative person there is a continual fire within that longs to be seen and heard. At the same time, there are other combative pieces of my psyche that wish to remain quiet and anonymous, that feel inadequate and mundane enough to remain voiceless. This reflective essay, looking back to the experiences surrounding my summer Digital Texts course, can easily be viewed as the therapeutic summary of recognizing my own creative voice, and how that voice fits into my life as an educator.

Early Stories

As a young and restless (and extremely unfocused/unrefined) ball of creative energy, I spent the latter part of my high school years and subsequent, early college years travelling all over the intellectual map. I had little idea as to which direction I wanted my life to go, and regretfully received very little constructive guidance in that department. After testing a handful of college majors (art, graphic design, radiology, marine biology) I completely lost what little focus I had, and eventually dropped out of college. Too much school! I spent nearly a decade working menial jobs (handyman, grocer, post man, factory worker, truck driver) but remained restless and dissatisfied. Too much structure!! From that jumping off point I decided to venture headlong into the business of “creative storytelling”. It somehow made sense to me that owing to my early affinities for visual, written and spoken texts, I should try my own hand at creating children’s books and puppet plays. My adventures as a freelance artist lasted less than two years . . . too much freedom.

Upon returning to collegiate life (which seemed to be the only legitimized way of earning a decent living) I became more attuned to the significance of digital storytelling, though at that time I would have been hard-pressed to identify it within the same contexts experienced during the summer of 2011. Certainly not all university courses piqued my interests, and not all professors possessed the gift of a 'classic storyteller'. But from my undying fondness for written, spoken, and visual stories came the subsequent interest in courses and teachers that mirrored my own affinities. One of my earliest and most admired instructors, an eclectic and well-versed regional campus professor named Sean Daniels, introduced me to the early black/white films of William Wegman, the cinematic tirades of Paul McCarthy, and the eloquent Spalding Gray monologues. Heady stuff for a small-town, small-time artist like myself who had never heard or seen such things! I was instantly drawn to the immediacy and candor within those works, and can only now in retrospect see how they would eventually shape my own artistic stories (1).

Developing an Artistic Education

After my return to the academic world, and the finalization of my Bachelor's Degree in Art Education, I began teaching Visual Art at Benjamin Logan Elementary School in rural Bellefontaine, Ohio. A homogenous, working class school district (97% Caucasian, \$70,000 mean household income, strong manufacturing/retail workforce – Source: Proximity, 2013), and one quite similar to that which I attended in neighboring Hardin county, the Benjamin Logan district offered me that 'golden opportunity' as a teacher to develop a Visual Arts program that encompassed something more substantial than what I had always felt to be my

own naïve and mediocre art experience prior to college. From the first days of teaching I viewed my challenge and responsibility as an art educator within a context similar to the one presented by Olivia Gude (2000) in her online article, *Investigating the Culture of Curriculum*: “When planning a beginning art curriculum, every teacher should ask, “Recognizing that this may be THE LAST ART CLASS my students will ever take, what do they need to know in order to begin a lifelong engagement with the art of the past and the unfolding present?”” (p. 3). That simple, beautiful question has unknowingly shaped my teaching methodology from the very start of my career.

Guided by both my undergraduate educational experiences at Ohio State and the Ohio Academic Content Standards for the Visual Arts, developing an Elementary art curriculum proved from the very beginning to be a dichotomous endeavor. While standards and professional methodologies have provided a basic structure to my curriculum over the years, the question of “If you could teach anything about art, what would you teach?” is one that I have always tucked somewhere within the back of my teacherly thoughts. Over the years I have introduced my fair share of “Big Ideas” thematic-styled lessons, simplistic studio-based exercises with art media, ‘story-based’ lessons evolving from a book or movie context, and even in-depth studies of specific artists. By the end of my fourth year of teaching in 2011 I felt as though I had tried all of the approaches to art education that I could get my fingers on . . . and I somehow still managed to come up “empty”. It was with that lost, ambivalent feeling I began my OSU Master’s Degree program.

Creating Stories – Pt. 1

The introductory weeklong Master's course with Dr. Walker, AE 700 – *Issues In Art Education*, initially felt redundant and unchallenging as it followed a very similar track taken during my OSU undergraduate experience. Eventually however that class set the stage for some of my most thoughtful and inspired work as a graduate student (see Essay One - *Moving Back To Big Ideas: Artmaking in the Elementary Classroom*). The long-reaching effects of that course, and the AE 604 course that followed, not only shaped my sense of artist/teacher/self, but would eventually filter back into the digital storytelling projects taken a year later.

During that first week of 604 together we received an overview of the Big Ideas approach to teaching art, focusing on the theme of 'Identity' and supported by artists such as Pepon Osorio, Cindy Sherman, Trenton Doyle Hancock, and Nikki S. Lee. The PBS series, Art 21 substantiated our knowledge base, and along with an animated TED talk by Sir Ken Robinson I can now reflect upon how my thoughts were being gently manipulated by those digital narratives, just as my teaching practice had been from college up until that point. My personal artwork, on the other hand, had not always been so thematically grounded. While I had at times created story-based projects, most of my "traditional" pieces were shallow paintings, drawings, and sculptures devoid of a deeper sense of meaning and self-examination. Those practices were subtly beginning to change through the more "narrative" projects and assignments of the first two quarters.

Following a study of photographer Cindy Sherman and her methodologies, our fourth creative assignment in AE 604 was with "Changing Appearance – Changing Identity". After reluctantly altering our appearances with various shared "props" (we had only met each other

two days prior), we quickly snapped pictures of each other in costume and then set to work digitally transforming our identities. The final works, which started out quite playful and trivial, ended as uniquely complex and deeply personal pieces (2). Not only did my own works tackle issues of identity in rather confrontational/satirical ways, they also stood by themselves as digitally manipulated narratives:

In both instances I chose to not only force myself into stereotypical ‘costumes’, but to also weave myself into a pictorial narrative with the groups I was stereotyping. I believe the choices made within this assignment reflect my identity as an artist and person . . . that there is playfulness in the way I choose to construct meaning, but at the same time there is a thoughtfulness that asks the viewer to move beyond face value and notice the subtleties. (Reese, 2011)

Following that assignment, our final project for winter quarter was to create a digital “alter-ego” using various props, digital photographs, Photoshop and PowerPoint. Once again my project took on a humorous, narrative approach as I sought to reconcile the various aspects of myself as a teacher. I titled the piece *Clash of the Egos . . . a Comical Tale* (3). Again, interesting reflective dialogue followed:

...I feel that the conflicting identities that I am currently struggling with as a teacher are both painfully and humorously depicted in my alter ego narrative. Using that comical tale as a springboard into the rest of my graduate studies, I have the hope that those disparities will eventually find some sort of resolution. (Reese, 2011)

In retrospect I find it interesting that the use of the narrative found its way so easily into those assignments, and that they continued to evidence themselves in the courses that followed.

BIG IDEAS Taking Form

As illustrated in Essay One, Art Ed. 604D - *The Artmaking Process*, played a pivotal role in the refinement of my curriculum and the further development of my “art teacher self”,

although those revelations were quite lost on me at the time. I continued on with my Master's program, feeling increasingly out of touch and just as uncertain as I had prior to my initial summer. When the second summer course, Art Ed. 7606 finally arrived, I returned to campus with the first full beard of my life . . . and a head full of jumbled-up thoughts. *"What was I trying to get from this Master's program – just the degree? Why did I feel that my passion for teaching was diminishing rather than growing?"* On campus, Dr. Eisenhower eased us into the process and ideas behind digital storytelling, sharing both personal and outside examples of what a digital narrative might look like. The idea, while seemingly simple, struck me as more of a challenge than I initially let on. The stories shared during the first two days of class were extremely personal, highly emotional, and tinged with more than a dose of sadness. Even those viewed online at the Center for Digital Storytelling website tugged at the heartstrings, and for some reason that troubled me. As the quote at the beginning of this essay points out, we all have stories to tell, and I would add that many of them are sad ones. For me however the idea of sharing my deepest, darkest, most personal tragedies left me scrambling for a different approach. Time to really put on the 'thinking cap' and look elsewhere.

One aspect of collegiate studies that I have always problematized is a 'disconnect' – that theory seems to have a tenuous relation to what I would call "real world applications". Put simply, one can easily become lost in theories and ideas and thereby lose track of how those ideas apply (if indeed they do) to real world situations and dilemmas. Using that thought as one piece of my internal motivation, and taking a more emotionally "upbeat" approach to the digital narrative as the second piece, I set to work crafting an advocacy-based narrative focusing on my personal feelings and experiences as an art teacher, with my beloved students, and

within my own classroom in Bellefontaine. The greatest challenge, once the idea was firmly in hand, was to transfer those thoughts and emotions to digital media using iMovie – a program that had been sitting quietly on my personal computer but never used. In more ways than one I definitely had my work cut out for me.

At that same time I had enrolled with Dr. Karen Hutzel for an Independent Study credit. After some thoughtful discussion together, we proposed that my time for this credit hour might be dedicated to creating a website advocating the importance of the Visual Arts in education - my own art program, in particular (4, 5). She directed me towards Mrs. Donna Collins, a passionate advocator for the arts in central Ohio (Ohio Citizens for the Arts, Ohio Alliance for Arts Education), and between Dr. Hutzel's guidance and Mrs. Collins' conversation I found myself truly inspired to put together some energizing digital work that spoke to my passion for quality arts education. Adding my upcoming digital storyline into that endeavor would hopefully put me on the energized, positive path I had been searching for.

Digital Stories and Beyond

Back in the OSU classroom, my digital story was beginning to take shape. I had collected a number of digital photos taken over my 4+ years of teaching (being one of the fortunate students in our cohort who was able to commute back and forth throughout the week) and slowly, patiently began the process of 'stitching' everything together. As a Macintosh user I quickly caught on to the basics of iMovie, although my sympathies went out to any PC users (and those less "tech-savvy" teachers) among us! Even with that small degree of comfort, the piece-by-piece work of manipulating images, transitioning them, incorporating sounds, and

putting the entire mini-production together took all of my available class time that week. I even snuck in some additional editing work at home!! By the end of two days worth of studio time, I felt that my digital story was at least in a presentable form . . as an overly critical artist I knew it would never 'officially' be ready.

We came together during our final day on campus to share our completed digital stories, with the addition of one third-year Master's student to our cohort of nine. The presentations went as I expected, following the premise that the stories we were sharing with each other were "...basically about 'telling lives', that is, how people use different meditational means in their everyday lives to express personal narratives and share these with others." (Erstad & Wertsch, 2008). The digital stories were very personal, at times extremely emotional, and as a whole were put together very well. We laughed with each other, and certainly consoled each other when our emotions ran aground. When it came time for 'my turn' my heart raced. I knew what I had brought to share, but my reticence and self-criticism always seem to reverberate in the back of my mind and compound any heightened anxiety. No more prolonging the inevitable . . . I humbly presented my movie to the class (6).

What Do You Do?

Intro quote – "Art is the window into man's soul."

(...Without it, he would never be able to see beyond his immediate world; nor could the world see the man within.)

- Claudia Lady Bird Johnson

When someone asks me "What do you do for a living?", I tell them what I do. But when I stop and think about it, what I REALLY SHOULD say is...

"I expand horizons",

"I awaken the creative spirit within",

"I turn molehills into MOUNTAINS",

“I expect the unexpected!”

Perhaps I should say that...

“I invite students to think OUTSIDE THE BOX”,

“I open doors to discovery, empathy, and understanding”,

“I offer glimpses of worlds far beyond their own”,

“I am in the business of CREATIVE POSSIBILITIES!!”

Or maybe I should say that...

“I am someone who, like you, wants what’s best for your child”,

“I am investing in the critical thinkers of tomorrow”,

“I give all that I have, everyday, with the hope that my passion might inspire others”,

“I do what I love . . . and love what I do!”

But I don’t say any of those things. When someone asks me what I do, I simply reply, “I teach art”, and hope that somehow, in some way, they understand.

I asked for the thoughts of my peers, both as teachers and also from the perspective of those who were parents. To me putting such thought and emotion into the public sphere, with my name attached to it no less, sent tremors up my spine. Reactions were mixed – no standing ovations, of course, and no overly negative criticisms. An extremely polite and slightly biased crowd, perhaps? The true test, I reckoned, would come in the months ahead when I shared it with my art students in the fall.

Into the Elementary Art Room

After the completion of our summer course I set to work planning my curriculum, with the overarching idea of incorporating a healthy dose of digital storytelling into the mix. I would

begin by sharing my short movie with all students at the onset of the school year, and would also begin with a short, collaborative video project. During my summer planning I had stumbled across a short movie created by a West Coast filmmaking team called *Everyone* (<http://www.everynone.com/>) and immediately envisioned how we might create a similar production with my 500 or so, 1st – 4th grade helping hands☺ Starting from a ‘circle template’, students would spend the first couple of weeks in the art room expressing their creativity (and getting back into the swing of all things school related) by transforming a simple circle into something “spectacular”.

The concept of turning a circle into something creative and unique ended up being quite accessible to the students, regardless of their age or level of technical competence. They utilized various “dry media” such as crayons, colored pencils, pens and markers to design their circle, with little guidance on my behalf save an occasional “Be sure to take those ‘white spaces’ into consideration”. As always, the students came through in colorful fashion, and created 495 unique, artistic frames for our mini-movie. We eventually, and quite democratically, decided which soundtrack to use within our movie by taking time in each class to “vote” on our favorite musical score. Our final choice was one of the several created by my musical son Max, entitled “*Messin’ Around*”. The difficult, and certainly unforeseen piece within our first musical storytelling project was in transferring almost five hundred images into digital format, and then finalizing them in iMovie. Much to my chagrin, the task wasn’t completed until Christmas break 2012 (7).

In addition to the *Circles* collaborative video short, my lesson plans also included a “character project” created by 4th grade students. Centered around Dr. Hutzel’s Art Ed. 7767 *Multicultural/Service-Learning* course, the lesson evolved into a two-part project, to: 1. Invite community members into our classroom as a means of connecting our school with the larger world, and 2. To create additional video pieces from those experiences. The “character” piece evolved out of necessity – an observed need for better manners and student responsibility during the 4th grade lunch period I helped monitor with our school’s vice principal. In retrospect, the community project was semi-successful. Community volunteers fulfilled our needs with positive (albeit a bit “preachy”) life reflections, and I shot hours of video footage during that time to document the varied experiences. High points from the community visits were the joke-telling cartoonist (8), a World War II veteran, a travelling missionary, the adopted “character poodles”, and a lesson in proper table manners (complete with Swiss Roll appetizers!). That footage, as well as a short “lunch room rules” video, are both still in production (9).

The Future of Elementary Filmmaking? – Final Thoughts

The reception of the completed digital projects shared during this school year have been “luke-warm”, to put it as positively as possible. Information regarding both the “*What Do You Do?*” short and our introductory *Circles* movie had gone home with students in several newsletters, and a visual display was set up at this year’s annual 1st and 3rd grade Art Show in mid-March. Very few people shared comments during the Art Show, and to date there are only 26 views on the private YouTube/*Circles* link. The time and energy needed to put together even

a short digital piece, on top of other personal responsibilities, was far greater than I might have anticipated. Time constraints, student involvement in the ‘technical aspects’ of moviemaking, and a lackluster reception with the works already created have left the two additional digital narratives – the “community” piece and the “rules” video – in limbo for far too long, and therefore they continue to run the risk of not only losing their relevancy but remaining unfinished by the end of this school year.

When I stop to reflect upon the overall successes and failures emanating from Dr. Eisenhower’s *Digital Texts* course, I still find myself somewhere close to where I began this journey . . . with many conflicted emotions. On one hand the immediacy and potential of creating and sharing digital stories was never lost on me, regardless of where this year’s Elementary story ends. I still believe that there is something very important and powerful to be gained by incorporating authentic student voices into an artwork, whether the end be from an advocacy standpoint or simply for the joy of expression. At the same time it is an immense challenge to put together digital media with so many Elementary-aged hands. Ingenious project management and dedicated hours of work outside of the classroom are merely two of the prerequisites for taking on such an endeavor. Were the digital projects successful? How do you measure that question? I enjoyed the process and believe the students did too, and in the end perhaps that is answer enough.

An important and reflective question at this point would be, what would I do differently if I chose to incorporate digital storytelling into the classroom once more? I think back to my experiences in Dr. Eisenhower’s summer course, and the emotional impact that the various

digital stories had on me, the viewer. When I look at the pieces I/we created thus far, I don't believe that they have the level of engagement that was hoped for. Additionally, I recollect my conversation with Donna Collins last summer and my desire to use the digital stories and classroom website as a means of advocating for the arts and for what I am seeking to accomplish as a teacher. Her cautious advice to move beyond the word "advocacy" and to simply "let the students' voices be heard" still resonate within my mind, and is that one piece that I believe is missing from my digital works. In the future, my goal with digital work would be to focus on the students' thoughts, actions, and heart-felt messages. Putting those together in an engaging digital format might just end up being the window into my classroom that I wish parents, fellow staff-members and community members to peek into.

One final consideration within this narrative essay was something still unresolved and undeniably troubling that I mentioned within the first essay – the changing political/educational climate surrounding the public school system. This school year began with new and untested ideas on my part, and in our building with turbulent emotions following the new and yet untested Ohio Teacher Evaluation System. Emotions have spread themselves across the darker parts of the map as teachers seek to negotiate new demands, respond amicably with each other, and of course . . . teach! During this school year I have certainly tried many new curricular approaches - to varying degrees of success - and have felt more tension and exasperation with my efforts than at any point thus far in my teaching career. I share this final thought not out of sympathy, but out of the uncertainty with what is yet to come.

Extraordinary ideas and projects have evolved from my Ohio State University Master's courses, but my returning sense of sadness comes with the observation that I am teaching with more

restrictions, less creativity, and ultimately less enthusiasm than I had hoped for by the end of this Master's program. My goal going forward is to take the uplifting and inspiring experiences from AE 7606's summer experience and continue to create beautiful narratives from the amazing young thoughts, voices, and talents that are still longing to be heard.

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Picture Notations

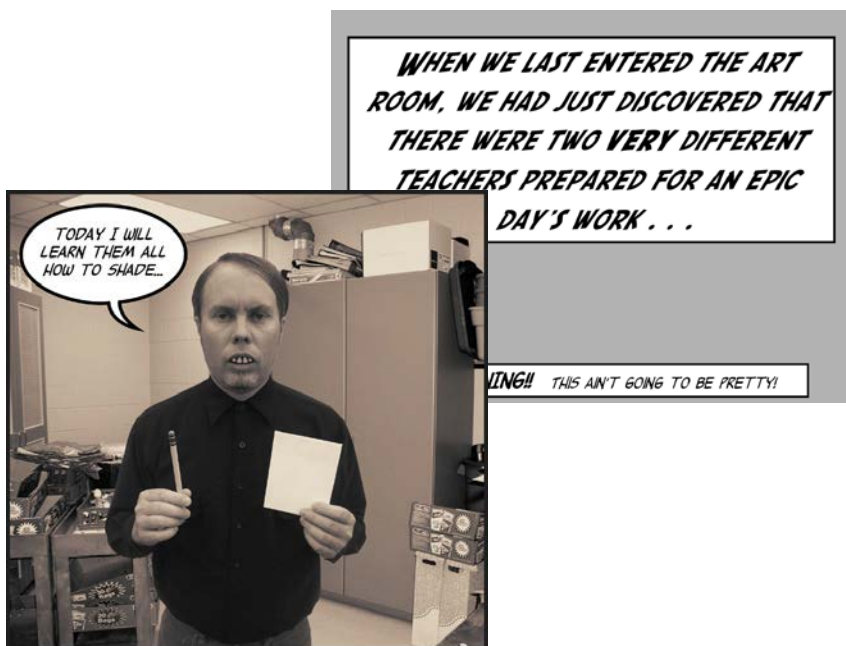
(1) Pre-Master's 3rd grade "puppetry production" – creating a live-action tall tale, *The Adventures of Young Benjamin Logan* (2010). A precursor to storytelling and the theatrical side of artmaking.



(2) Identity transformations – Summer 2011 (AE 700). Migrant worker Reese, and Reese's homeless persona.



(3) Alter Ego Assignment – Summer 2011 (AE 700). Stills from *Clash of the Egos – A Comical Tale*.



(5) "Art Room Advocacy Page" – 2012 OSU Independent Study project <https://sites.google.com/a/benjaminlogan.org/elementary-art/home>



(6) "What Do You Do?" - - 2012, 7606 Digital Texts advocacy movie <https://sites.google.com/a/benjaminlogan.org/elementary-art/home>



(7) *Circles* – 2012 BLES collaborative video short (teacher template example) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q50hM8FphE4&feature=youtu.be> (private link)



(8) Mr. Jon Watkins - Community volunteer and part-time cartoonist/comedian. One of the handful of community members who donated their time to share thoughts of “character” with 4th grade classes.



(9) 4th Grade Character Project – Local Art Show display of various student character/lunch room enhancements.



Conclusion

Writing reflectively has always been a natural piece within my practice as an artist and educator. I find that taking time to consider the effectiveness and areas of improvement surrounding any endeavor oftentimes leads to both intellectual and an internal, almost spiritual growth. I began writing this final reflective paper with the same hesitant question I felt at the beginning of my Master's program – had the experience been everything I imagined, or had it once again fallen short of my expectations? As I started the process of narrowing down two of the courses for further investigation, and collected the necessary information and data needed to inform my writings, I had that small, creeping sense of doubt that my educational endeavors had once again missed the mark.

The process of reflecting back through these courses long after the 'dust had settled' was one that I cannot give strong enough merit to. Being able to look back at the trials and tribulations of Art Ed. 604 a year after taking the course allowed me to synthesize the material in a deeper way, owing to the subtle effects that had taken place as a result of incorporating them into my practice. In that same light I hope to look back on both A.E. 7606 and the rest of my Master's courses when more time has passed, knowing that the rich connections woven throughout those experiences will never be a "magical end point" that I arrive at and feel a sudden sense of accomplishment with. I now understand it to be a continual, reflective journey in which I must always endeavor to challenge myself as an artist/educator and my students as artist/learners. It is this sense of peace and understanding that I am most proud of as a result of this Master's program, and one that will continue to guide my practice gracefully into the turbulent future of public education.